Librarian supply and demand

Today's library press is filled with discussion of the aging of the library profession. A large proportion of the librarian workforce is approaching retirement age, while fewer young persons are entering the profession. Reports indicate difficulty in filling open positions. In response, library organizations are placing a high priority on efforts to recruit and educate future librarians. In light of the current situation, it seems of interest to look at historical trends in the supply of available librarians and the demand to employ them. There have been several key points in the past when supply and demand were unbalanced. The contributing factors and the responses to the crises reflected both the unique circumstances of the times and enduring concerns of the profession.

A dramatic turn of events in the equilibrium of librarians and jobs occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the labor market changed from a shortage of librarians to an excess, catching librarians and educators by surprise. From the early 1950s, annual surveys of placement of library school graduates in beginning positions had shown that the United States did not have enough librarians to fill the available jobs. Although the surveys examined only placement, and the data were restricted to accredited master's of library science (MLS) programs, conditions in the market for new graduates can be expected to reflect accurately the state of the overall market for librarians [1]. The report in 1961 was typical, revealing once again more positions than graduates. It exclaimed that ''the new graduate could indulge all but his most captious desires in choosing his position—whether by type of library, type of work, or location. If he were free and uncommitted, the library world was his oyster: he was sought after, cajoled, beckoned, and enticed'' [2]. Population growth, the corresponding rise in school and college enrollment, the explosion in information, stronger school accreditation standards, and funding by the Library Services Act all contributed to an increase in the number of vacancies.

An inventory of library needs compiled in 1965 produced the often-quoted projection of a shortage of 100,000 librarians in the field. The inventory included estimates of the number of professionally trained staff needed to meet American Library Association (ALA) standards in public school, academic, and public libraries, compared to the number of present staff. (School libraries needed the preponderance of positions.) The gap exceeded the number of trained librarians being produced annually by thirty-three times [3]. As part of his education program, President Lyndon Johnson adopted the shortage figure and called for a library ''personnel development program of major dimensions and having many facets,'' including expansion of facilities for professional training, student financial aid, improved salary standards and employment conditions, and use of more library technicians and clerical assistants to release fully trained professional librarians [4].

The one paramount concern of the profession, as identified in a 1966 survey of ALA members, was the library workforce, including the issues of a greater pool, training, salaries, and recruitment. Major conferences were held, such as ''Crisis in Library Manpower—Myth and Reality'' [5]. A cover of a *Library Journal* issue on ''The Manpower Shortage'' featured the letters ''CRISIS'' formed by job ads [6].

Asheim suggested restructuring of jobs, creation of career ladders and a new technician class of library worker, continuing education, and executive development [7]. The profession argued about the impact of educational requirements on the size of the workforce. The *Library Journal* editor noted with approval a ''revolutionary'' recommendation to make an undergraduate degree from a four-year college the basic qualification for the first professional level. ''To talk about a 'shortage' (what an inadequate word!) of 100,000 librarians while maintaining this rigidity about educational qualifications [of an MLS] makes our whole posture on the manpower situation little short of ridiculous'' [8]. Asheim made a distinction between education and training; the downgrading of the profession implied by putting training below the master's level could result in an upgrading of graduate programs devoted to professional education [9].

Drennan and Reed called the shortage of professionally educated librarians ''common knowledge,'' but they qualified it as the continuing number of unfilled budgeted positions. By their estimates, the total number of vacancies in academic, public, and public school libraries for 1965 to 1966 would be 4,227 [10] (a marked difference from 100,000 jobs).

Bolino's analysis in 1969 was the first study to state clearly that the concept of need must be distinguished from that of demand. He emphasized that the shortage of librarians cited by professional groups was the number of librarians desired, unrelated to the number society wished and was able to hire at prevailing salary rates. He found that actual vacancy rates for librarians seemed to be declining. He also criticized the confusing use of data of graduates from accredited schools of librarianship to back up statements of shortage, without considering other sources of supply. At the time, unaccredited schools accounted for 40% of graduates. He concluded that ''cries of rising shortages may be exaggerated and that the vacancy rates are tolerable'' [11].

For the first time, the 1969 annual placement survey noted that new

graduates were having more difficulty finding jobs.

> [T]he big news is that, for the first time in the history of this series, we can observe a marked reduction in the number of openings available to these beginning librarians, strong evidence that the disparity between supply and demand that we have considered commonplace for the last two decades is at last beginning to narrow significantly. [12]

Other indicators of change also appeared. Degrees awarded by accredited MLS programs had increased by 200% between 1960 and 1970. The rate of growth slowed in 1970, although the number of degrees did not decline until 1976. In addition, starting salaries fell, relative to other professional salaries [13].

By 1970, sentiment in the profession reversed. Suddenly, articles about the ''manpower crisis'' turned into the ''death of the manpower shortage'' and the ''job crisis.'' These articles noted with irony recent Labor Department predictions for a favorable employment outlook for librarians and a continued nationwide shortage through the mid-1970s. They criticized the 100,000 mythical number as impressive and easily remembered but unrealistic. The profession was accused of practicing misleading recruitment and ignoring signs of a declining market. Library schools were thought guilty of a vested interest in increasing enrollments in face of the effect on the profession as a whole, and they were urged to screen applicants more vigorously and to revise curricula to meet changing demands [14–16]. A *College & Research Libraries* editorial said that ''American librarianship is indeed perched upon an employment time bomb . . . defused only if our professional association and/or the library schools succeed in stemming the flow of new graduates.'' It urged suppliers (library schools) to communicate with their market (libraries) to assess the job situation [17]. One library school catalog warned that those who were not highly motivated toward a career in librarianship should seek alternative careers [18].

Health sciences libraries were not directly addressed in the studies of the workforce discussed above, but they operated in the same climate. The Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965 included training provisions directed at shortages and uneven distribution of personnel in health sciences libraries. The Health Manpower Act of 1968 was based on a projected need of at least another million health professionals by 1975, producing further need for health information personnel [19], as did the twenty-four new medical schools and six dental schools in development in the United States and Canada. Kronick and Rees undertook an extensive investigation of the health sciences library workforce. They calculated a 7% vacancy rate in professional positions in 1969, similar to Bolino's estimate of shortages in other libraries. Although they did not find a serious shortage in terms of demand, they noted an urgent need to bring staffing levels to the point of providing adequate information services to the whole health sciences community [20]. Placement demands in health sciences libraries were down by the early 1970s, but not as far as in libraries overall [21].

The concerns echoed in some respects those expressed in an earlier era. The expansion in library school education to meet a shortage of librarians in the 1960s showed parallels with that of the 1920s, and the sudden shortage of positions in the 1970s produced an outcry reminiscent of the reaction in the 1930s. As the library profession developed in the early decades of the twentieth century, employment for librarians had been secure. Statistics for 1908 showed only 234 graduates from library schools with 10,142 persons employed in libraries. A library school recruitment brochure in 1911, titled *Librarianship: An Uncrowded Calling*, claimed that ''the total product of all the library schools does not nearly supply the normal demands arising from marriage, death, and resignations.'' From the period of World War I, the shortage of available trained librarians accelerated with rapidity. The profession responded by expanding opportunities for library education. In a brief period between 1923 and 1931, the profession had ''run rapidly up the scale from a serious shortage in the number of trained librarians all the way to what seems to be certain over-production.'' In addition, the workforce was young, with three-fourths of all library school graduates still in active service [22].

Joeckel calculated the annual needs of American libraries in the early 1930s for trained personnel to replace the normal number of vacancies to be 1,250. (Among his assumptions was that twelve years was a reasonable guess for the average length of a professional career, given resignations of women for personal reasons.) He argued that overproduction of librarians would drive down starting salaries and blur the distinction in service grades between librarians and clerical staff. He asked the Association of American Library Schools to find a way to limit the number of graduates and to exercise greater care in the selection of students [23].

The 1930s' Board of Education for Librarianship attributed unemployment among experienced librarians and difficulty in placing new graduates not only to economic conditions. The rapid expansion of training agencies offering summer courses, a common entry point for school librarians, and increased enrollment in library schools were also responsible. The board saw current conditions as an opportunity for the profession to strengthen its personnel, recommending that library schools reduce the size of their classes through more rigid scrutiny of applicants' ''qualities of leadership, aptitude for library service and likelihood of placement as well as [their] high academic standing'' [24].

A 1936 ALA report on unemployment believed that ''in the past years, too much emphasis has been placed on limiting the number of librarians while one third of the

country has no local library facilities and another third is but inadequately served.'' The chairman called for making it worthwhile to be a librarian, with improved compensation, and then for making it difficult to become one, with higher standards and certification. Library schools reported about 20% of their students were difficult to place in normal times, and it was hard to find persons who were adequately prepared and who possessed desired personal and administrative qualities for positions of responsibility [25].

Students of market conditions for librarians should know about two other important studies from the latter decades of the twentieth century. The Bureau of Labor Statistics prepared *Library Manpower: A Study of Demand and Supply* in 1975, in response to the abrupt shift in conditions. More than twice as many persons were employed in library occupations in 1970 as in 1960. The study forecast that employment would grow more slowly over the 1970 to 1985 period, with three-quarters of the job openings created by replacement needs from retirements or other departures from the labor force. It examined the interplay of trends in population and enrollment, public support for new and improved library services, the level of governmental spending for library programs, developments in library automation and networking, and changes in library staffing patterns. An estimated 9,000 new graduates were likely to enter the labor force annually [26]. No one foresaw the decline in library science degrees that would actually occur. Accredited programs awarded more than 6,000 MLS degrees in 1974; by 1980 the number had dropped precipitously to under 4,700 [27].

Library Human Resources: A Study of Supply and Demand followed in 1983. Published by ALA and prepared by King Research (Nancy Roderer was the project director), it forecast the supply and demand of professional librarians through 1990. It anticipated a smaller increase in employment than in the rather stable 1970s, with no return to the boom period of the 1960s. The number of individuals entering the job market was also projected to remain fairly constant. It took note of the significance of trends such as the recent movement of librarians into nonlibrary positions. The skyrocketing of women's labor force participation was of great importance to a profession in which females were a majority, but the movement of women into a wider range of fields could reduce the number in librarianship [28].

This brings us full-circle to the present. For the first time, the average age of the library profession is the key factor in the projection of a shortage. A large percentage of the current workforce will soon be eligible to retire, but new recruits are not entering the profession in sufficient numbers to fill vacant positions. The federal Institute of Museum and Library Services has initiated a grant program to promote recruitment of a new generation of librarians [29]. With a median age for librarians of forty-seven, more than 46% are expected to retire between 1998 and 2008 [30]. The trend holds across library types. Librarians in Association of Research Libraries institutions are older than U.S. librarians in general and aging more rapidly; the age gap between the two populations has widened in the 1990s from 2% to 9% [31]. The percentage of Medical Library Association members under the age of forty has dropped from 51% in 1983 to less than 21% in 2001; there are three times as many health sciences librarian jobs as applicants [32]. Among Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries directors, 49% plan to retire by 2010. Seventy-six percent of them are fifty years or older, as are 61% of deputy and associate directors [33, 34]. Contributing to the supply problem, ALA accredited eighty-three library and information science programs in the United States and Canada twenty years ago; today, there are fifty-eight [35]. These data point to the latest imbalance in supply and demand, but history's lesson is that the market is cyclical. Efforts to correct disproportions, though often necessary, have resulted in unintended consequences when changing conditions were not anticipated.

Carolyn E. Lipscomb
carolynlipscomb@cs.com
History Editor
Chevy Chase, Maryland

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